

Fighting to feel alive

Peng! Palast's work shows that combat, cooking and creation can help people to forge connections

REVIEW/THEATRE

FIGHT! PALAST#MEMBERSONLY (NC16)

Peng! Palast

M1 Singapore Fringe Festival

Esplanade Theatre Studio/Last Friday

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Okay. Okay, okay, okay. It's about this guy. This girl. And this other guy. Three members of Gen X or Y.

In the punchy rhythms of Chuck Palahniuk prose, these 30somethings confess their connection to the American writer's 1996 novel *Fight Club*.

Like its apathetic narrator, these three feel like they sleepwalk through life. Progeny of parents who prospered in times of economic growth, they take dead-end

jobs to finance ephemeral art.

Their parents have houses or cars, tangible markers of success. The artists can survive on the state dole and have difficulty explaining their relevance and function in society, even to themselves.

Then they take a kickboxing class and understand what makes *Fight Club* so profound a story.

When you fight, you are completely focused on your opponent, say these three members of German-Swiss troupe Peng! Palast. In almost no other activity are you so aware of your connection to another human being, so aware of being alive.

They say this while sparring in the Esplanade Theatre Studio, while two members of the audience are invited on stage to construct a set of Ikea shelves.

As the artists box, the invited viewers get over their shyness, find a complementary rhythm and put together the furniture well before the performers have finished jabbing at one another.

"You won," they are told by performer and co-creator Dennis Schwabenland.



Christoph Keller (far left) and Nina Mariel Kohler face off in Fight! Palast#members-only at the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

PHOTO: JAMIE CHAN

The point is obvious. Co-operation and competition are both ways of forging human relationships and authentic connections. It is a skill millennials and members of Gen X need to regain.

Peng! Palast's work at this year's M1 Singapore Fringe Festival is surprisingly mellow compared with its 2013 presentation here at the same festival.

The older work, *The Holycoaster S(hit) Circus*, was a compendium of racial and cultural insensitivity based on the German-Swiss troupe's interaction with Israel's Machol Shalem Dance House. Prejudices and teeth were bared over Nazis and the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. No punches were pulled even if none were thrown.

In contrast, performers spar seriously during *Fight! Palast#members-only*, but hurting one another is not the point. Schwabenland simply tries to avoid the reach of his co-director Christoph Keller and is perfectly willing to let his wife, performer Nina Mariel Kohler, work out her rage on him.

Kohler and Keller engage in a more serious bout with the former revealing how much she feels she needs to win, for the sake of her ego and to inspire other women. "You can do it!" bursts out of one female viewer before their bout ends in a draw.

After the theatrical presentation,

Kohler takes a third of the audience aside to engage in a kick-boxing workshop. Keller helps another third make plaster casts of their fists for a take-home memento. Schwabenland teaches another third to make German potato salad, but with cucumber and chilli to engage the Singaporean palate.

Combat, cooking and creation: three main drives of humanity are harnessed to forge connections, the fourth need that defines people. Membership in *Fight! Palast#members-only* is not exclusive. Including as many as possible is the charming point.

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